

That **foreign** feeling

I moved to Switzerland thinking I'd be admired for being different and exotic. But I soon realised Americans living in Switzerland are about a dime a dozen. Then one day, I met two guys from Appenzell. And they thought differently.

By Chantal Panozzo | When I was young, one of my favourite books was *The Little Prince*. I especially liked the moment when the Little Prince realised he could be unique in the world despite the thousands of other little boys out there, if he just learned to love someone.

But I thought I could be exotic the easy way. Moving 5,000 miles from home to live in Switzerland surely had to make me different and interesting – at least to the locals. After all, as an American, I was taught at a young age that I was unique, and I knew from watching television that I could become even more so by whitening my teeth and firming up my abs – in the United States, being extra special is only a few monthly instalments away.

So I moved with high hopes of impressing the Swiss with my specialness, only to realise Switzerland has a foreign population of 20 per cent and as an American, I was about as exotic as a cowbell. I was tolerated to help the Swiss economy, but they didn't care about my extra white teeth or my shiny brown hair. Often, I didn't feel very well liked or even acknowledged despite my unique attempts at the German language – which involved speaking entirely in the present tense and trying to maintain at least a 33 per cent score when it came to picking out proper articles.



Yodelling farm boys from Appenzel hit the “big city” streets of Zurich

Times change ... in some places

Unlike the experience of my American mother, who lived in Gabon in the 1960s and tells stories that include all the locals touching her hair and admiring her “foreignness”, most Swiss people can't tell I'm not Swiss until I open my mouth. And they certainly don't care one way or the other about touching my hair (not that I mind).

Three years after moving to Switzerland, I had almost given up the fantasy of feeling foreign, until one day, while hanging out with some linguistically talented Swiss friends at the Sechseläuten Festival in Zurich, we noticed a couple of guys in lederhosen. They were alone, so we invited these mountain men, clad in gold-plated cow suspenders, to join us in celebrating the Swiss tradition of watching a snowman being burned to oblivion.

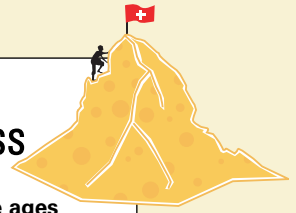
The lederhosen guys were from Appenzell and had come to the “big city” to transport their horses to the festival. Unlike most of my Swiss friends, they didn't speak English or High German but that didn't matter. It was part of their allure since most Swiss like to correct not only my High German, but my English as well. These guys just kissed me.

Through translation, my friends informed me that these men worked on a mountain in the middle of the Alps and did things like milk cows, make cheese, chop wood and yodel.

Thank you, Mr. President

The Appenzellers wanted to know where I was from, but “Chicago” got blank stares.

“Obamatown,” I offered.



All things Swiss

Switzerland through the ages

1902: Neuchâtel throws its first official wine-harvest bash, spanning three days at the end of September. Since then, the picking of the grapes has been celebrated annually, culminating in a parade featuring brass bands, flower-bedecked floats and costumed merrymakers. This year's celebration will run from September 25-27.

1982: "Rumantsch Grischun" – developed to serve as a standard form of Romansh – was born. Created for administrative purposes, it was in answer to the five distinct idioms that exist within the Romansh language (each with a different written tradition, and each with several dialects). A 2001 Graubünden cantonal referendum approved Rumantsch Grischun for official election materials, and the legal code. In 2005, Microsoft stamped its validity by adding it as a desktop language.

1999: Vevey's last wine harvest festival. The Canton Vaud fête, held on Lake Geneva, occurs just once every 25 years. Highlights include a guest appearance by the God of Wine himself, Bacchus. If you don't fancy waiting for the next one, you can attend Canton Ticino's "Bacchica – Grape Harvest Festival" in Bellinzona from September 11-13. Revellers will be treated to a costumed parade, and plenty of tasting. Another option, on the French side of the *Röstigraben*, is Canton Geneva's annual "Russin Harvest Festival", from September 19-20.

Expat encyclopaedia

Appenzell: My new favourite Swiss village, not just for its huggable Old Town, but because I know I might have a chance at being exotic there.

Foreigner: Someone who just wants to be liked.

Grilling a sausage: An activity that serves as a rite of passage to becoming Swiss and is also something no Swiss festival would be complete without.

Tunnels: A popular festival location in Switzerland. The construction of a new tunnel is reason enough for a party complete with Raclette and brass music (both of which are unfortunate combinations inside a tunnel).

"Where do you come from?": At some point after living abroad, you will have trouble answering this question. That is completely normal.



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... Chantal, fitting right in

"She's from the town where Obama lived," translated my Swiss friend Hans.

Now I was a celebrity and I wasn't about to waste my fame. "Can you yodel for me?" I asked, "All Americans – even those of us who have been here awhile – dream about hearing yodelling in Switzerland."

Before I knew it my request had been translated and the Appenzeller guys were giving me a private yodelling concert on the steps of the Zurich Opera House.

"It's like no big deal, they learn to yodel when they're little," Hans whispered to me as I filmed them with my digital camera. "And have you noticed that they are short? All guys from Appenzell are short. It's because of all the incest," he added.

Shortness and potential incest aside, I found them beautiful.

Role reversal

When they were finished, I tried to ask if they would mind if I posted a yodelling clip on YouTube. They didn't understand.

"She wants to put your singing on the Internet," translated Hans into dialect.

We don't have the Internet, was the reply. Wow, no Internet. These guys were growing more and more exotic by the minute.

"Please grill some sausages with us, American girl. We've never hung out with an American before," said the dark-haired one shyly.

But my English-speaking Swiss friends were leaving and suddenly I got scared. "I'm sorry, but I have to go," I lied.

As the Appenzeller guys kissed me in parting, the blond one stroked my hair in the process. I couldn't wait to tell my mom.